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Art on Main Street¹

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A LITTLE OVER a year ago a well-known news commentator published the following remark in a St. Paul newspaper: "On Summit Avenue between Snelling and the Cathedral I counted fourteen iron fences. There are hundreds more in St. Paul—some of them rusty, unsightly relics of an unbeautiful past. They do little good."² And under the slogan "De-fence for Defense," school children carefully surveyed the field, counted up more than five thousand iron fences, and prepared for the most gigantic Hallowe'en festival the city had ever seen. For some reason, fortunately—whether from conservative caution or simple inertia, I do not know—the match that thus was dropped did not start much of a conflagration, but the suggestion had significant possibilities.

Early in 1942 wreckers destroyed the stately old Emmett mansion on West Seventh Street in St. Paul. Why? There are always reasons for destruction just as there are reasons for conservation, but seldom are the two arguments actually weighed one against the other for a fair and intelligent decision. The fact is that this house, one of the first and finest examples of the classic revival in Minnesota, beauti-

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented as the annual address before the ninety-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on January 10, 1944. It was followed by a series of slides depicting pioneer structures of old St. Paul and Minneapolis. Since financial considerations make it impossible to present the illustrations with the article, Professor Schmeckebier has added a few paragraphs to his original address, commenting on some of the pictures and presenting some of the conclusions reached. A few of the buildings illustrated are listed *post*, p. 56. *Ed.*

² *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 22, 1942.

ful in itself as well as rich in musical folklore and in local sentiment, was destroyed. Pathetic and fruitless attempts were made at the last minute to prevent the inevitable. But it is interesting to note that among the organizations which came to the defense of the old house was the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, not the Minnesota Historical Society.

While walking down Sherman Street, another St. Paul thoroughfare, some time ago, I noticed the tall Doric columns of a Greek revival house complete with prostyle cella, shallow peridrome, full entablature, frieze windows, and low-pitched roof, as recommended by the standard architectural handbooks of the nineteenth century.⁸ Its awkward position on a small lot at the very edge of the sidewalk indicated that it was not on the site for which it was originally built. Its dull gray paint, crumbling foundations, and general disheveled state suggested a slow process of disintegration that must have been going on for many decades.

Investigations by Miss Jean Anne Vincent on the early architecture of St. Paul reveal that this house was built by Daniel A. Robertson in 1854 and that it was originally located around the corner on Fort Street, now West Seventh Street, right next door to the Emmett house.⁴ Robertson's granddaughter, Mrs. Ralph Emerson of Milton, Massachusetts, has preserved a photograph of the house as it appeared in the early 1860's. The contrast between the house represented in the photograph and the present structure is significant from many points of view. What was once a dignified, elegantly proportioned mansion of solid American tradition, gleaming white in the midst of spacious lawns and tall elms, is now a broken derelict crowded into a slum area. The comfortable dining room, parlor, library, and bedrooms of this house once provided decent living quarters for one self-respecting family. Today no fewer than six families of more than average size occupy the same building.

So it is with many another monument that grew out of the social

⁸ See, for example, Asher Benjamin, *The Architect, or Practical House Carpenter* (Boston, 1850).

⁴ The Emmett house was built by Alpheus Fuller in 1854, and four years later it was acquired by Judge Lafayette Emmett. Miss Vincent discusses the Emmett and Robertson houses in an unpublished study of "Saint Paul Architecture, 1848-1906." A copy is in the library of the University of Minnesota.

and economic life of Minnesota. The corner in downtown St. Paul which once reflected the strong rugged pioneer character of the old Customhouse and Federal Courts Building now holds an obviously sanitary one-story Fanny Farmer store. After resisting its blighted surroundings for many years, the proud West Hotel of Minneapolis — still a good building and a work of art — was destroyed, to be succeeded by a filth-collecting parking lot. And Minnesota cities are not alone, but a part of the endless Main Street that stretches from Broadway to Wilshire Boulevard — a bizarre, colorful, neon-lighted panorama that seems to be constantly in flux. Examples of architecture and the other arts that are honestly conceived and honestly executed are indiscriminately torn down. Somehow there always remain gas stations that look like Oriental pagodas and hot-dog stands built in the shapes of Mexican hats and pussycats.

I cite these examples as characteristic of what is happening to art on Main Street. They are confined to architecture because it is perhaps the first and most important of the creative arts; likewise buildings are the most difficult and expensive to destroy. The pattern of cultural and historical irresponsibility will be found equally as vivid in the other indigenous arts. Examples of original design and execution are swept indiscriminately into attics, basements, second-hand stores, and warehouses, to be individually forgotten and finally destroyed in order to create storage space for more.

Thus we have a dilemma which has become almost standard for the last two generations. It seems dangerously close to the thinking that would destroy little pigs and plow under corn as a means of curing our economic ills. And yet one of our most eminent scholars in the history of art, while claiming that "Much of the task of higher education must always be to assure the student of his heritage in the past," recommends that we withhold consideration of an artist's work until he has been dead at least twenty years.⁵ Though not deliberately, the advice seems to have been followed, and the indiscriminate wrecking of our regional artistic production — the good along with the bad — has been the result.

⁵ Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "Old Art or New," in the *College Art Journal*, 1:31 (January, 1942).

What can we as individuals do about it? Well, we can protest. I have tried, as certainly many of you have, and I find one easily gets himself into trouble. When I questioned the impending destruction of one of the older university buildings, a prominent architect remarked that the average life of a modern building is only about twenty years, and that a building when it has outlived its usefulness should be destroyed.

To a leading Minneapolis businessman, who is also a public-spirited citizen and a popular patron of the arts, I protested the imminent destruction of the West Hotel and asked whether, through his influential friends, something could not be done about it. He conceded its historic and aesthetic value to the Northwest, but flatly closed the discussion with the statement that the building did not pay, taxes were high, and it was out-of-date anyway. Did the Palace of Versailles pay? Was Santa Sophia allowed to live for only twenty years? Now that many churches of Mexico presumably have outlived their usefulness, are they destroyed? Our architectural monuments are not the great masterpieces of European art history, their prestige is not established by volumes of critical literature, but, like our ancestors, they are ours and should be viewed with comparable pride and compassion.

The argument of the practical man that these buildings are no longer functional is not the fault of the work of art, but of that same practical man. The blighted areas—like the taxes—are man-made. The intelligent understanding and utilization of a building from the standpoint of its own intended function is one means of maintaining the confidence, perspective, and equilibrium which only the study of history—of the arts as well as of politics and the like—can give.

How often have you heard the remark that a building may be all right, but that it is hardly beautiful! The history of art in Minnesota, as in any other region, reveals many different concepts of beauty which often completely contradict one another, granted the single and all-important premise that to be beautiful the design of a work of art must be well conceived and equally well executed. Such concepts may range in importance from superficial whims of taste to

genuine expressions of what one can call "style." They may conform to what we call beautiful today, or they may not. They constitute, nevertheless, a part of what we are today. Understanding them may help us somewhat in the difficult task of understanding ourselves.

Traditionally, art critics are not wanting in self-confidence. But when we the public see examples of the older local arts on Main Street referred to as "unsightly relics of an unbeautiful past," we might doubt some of the convictions we have grown up with or have worked out for ourselves. Let us look back to see what the people themselves said about the houses they were building or saw going up about them.

In 1857 the *Falls Evening News* of St. Anthony published an article describing the new home of Dr. Alfred E. Ames, which was situated on the sloping ground overlooking Minneapolis and the Falls of St. Anthony. It was built in the "Grecian style," according to the article, with "beauty and symmetry" both within and without, and with "none of the awkward and ponderous massiveness that hangs around the old castles of the Rhine."⁶

Three years later a St. Paul newspaper described as follows Bishop Thomas L. Grace's new residence on Sixth Street in that city: "In all the essential elements of durability, convenience and architectural finish it is, perhaps, ahead of any other building in Minnesota. . . . The splendid cupola on the top of the main building, the cornices and all the wood work on the outside of the building corresponding in finish and color with the stone work, present an appearance of elegant architectural completeness which reflects great credit on the mind that conceived as well as on the hands that executed it. . . . Such buildings not only add beauty and grace to our utilitarian city, but convey to strangers an exalted idea of the architectural taste and refinement of our citizens, and we hope those who contemplate erecting good residences next season may profit by and if possible improve upon the example."⁷

In following the records, one will find many aesthetic ideals in direct competition, with the eventual conquest of one ideal by an-

⁶ *Falls Evening News* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), October 2, 1857.

⁷ *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), November 25, 1860.

other as art on Main Street developed. When the simple Grecian plan began to give way to more elaborate designs, a St. Paul newspaper, with some self-consciousness, described the Horace Thompson home as "one of the finest residences in the city," adding that "it is of the irregular Italian villa style; the tall and graceful tower overlooking the city, and giving a view of the river for miles below."⁸

The ideal of the Tuscan villa, in contrast to the older Grecian style, is described in one of the handbooks on architecture which were popularly used by builders and architects of the mid-century: "It will be at once perceived that while this mode retains much of the expression of the Grecian style, it has far more variety, and a much more domestic character than the former. The characteristic quality of the purest specimens of Grecian architecture is *elegant simplicity*, and it is a quality which is most appropriately displayed in a temple. On the other hand we should say that the characteristic quality of the modern Italian buildings is *elegant variety*, which is most fitly exhibited in a tasteful villa. The great simplicity of the form of the first is highly suited to a temple, where singleness of purpose to which it is devoted appears symbolized in the simple Oneness of the whole edifice. The irregularity of the second is equally in unison with the variety of wants, occupations and pleasures which compose the routine of domestic life."⁹

The personality of the owner is not ignored in these pioneer mansions. The square plan was recommended as most suitable for "the man of common sense views."¹⁰ Indeed, more than once the character and personality of a man was reflected in the home he built. Thus Henry H. Sibley's mansion on Woodward Avenue in St. Paul is described by his biographer as "massive and solid, quadrangular form, two stories high, surmounted by a cupola. . . . The ground on which it rests has a frontage of three hundred and thirty-three feet, running back two hundred and twenty feet, the whole beauti-

⁸ *Pioneer and Democrat*, November 25, 1860. Pictures of the Thompson, Emmett, and Sibley houses are among the illustrations appearing with an article by Evadene Burris Swanson on "Building the Frontier Home," *ante*, 15:45, 52.

⁹ Andrew J. Downing, *Cottage Residences*, 145 (New York, 1853).

¹⁰ Andrew J. Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 262 (New York, 1851).

fied with the waving foliage of the oak, the maple, and the box-elder, rows of magnificent and stately elms lining the sidewalk, distant from which the mansion stands nearly one hundred feet, embowered within the arbored ground, and accessible by paved and graveled walks." The *Chicago Times* described Sibley's home as "the result of an evolution from the original shanty which he saw erected on the present site of the city, and, like himself, the perfected development of an original product which, at first, was planted in the crude soil of a savage wilderness."¹¹

The understanding of the beautiful in the art of Main Street can best be developed from the ideals and judgments of those who conceived and experienced it as a part of their total existence. From the quotations cited herewith, it is apparent that the owners of the houses described were by no means incapable of aesthetic judgment, and their opinions were not based primarily on whether or not a building paid.

By calling attention to those "unsightly relics of an unbeautiful past," perhaps we are falling prey to the senseless adoration of things just because they are old — the antique-hunters' disease. Maybe the gaudy color and shiny tin that has been nailed onto the front of the corner saloon to make it look modern improves it. But there are two phases of modern art that all of you are well aware of — the flashy color and slick design that can be counted on to pay commercially, and the less appealing but more honest emphasis on essentials. Architects have written, preached, and even begged that people should build according to their needs and within the limitations of available material in order to make their homes honest as well as attractive.

Most of us think of the architect Frank Lloyd Wright as a handsome little man with flowing white hair, who has a genius for insulting people as well as for building beautiful houses to suit himself for other people to live in. Yet no one man has done more to awaken in the minds of intelligent people, both in modern America and in the world at large, an interest in the essentials of architecture — ma-

¹¹ Nathaniel West, *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley*, 420 (St. Paul, 1889). West quotes the *Chicago Times* of January 30, 1886.

terials, forms, spaces, and their integration into an organic whole. He often speaks of materials for instance as an artistic resource and, with his characteristic flair for expression, refers to each as having a language of its own: "Each material has its own message and to the creative artist, its own song." Stone, he declares, "is a solid material: heavy, durable and most grateful for, and so most effective in masses. A 'massive' material we say; so, the nobler the masses the better."¹² It's the craftsman speaking here, a craftsman whose creative imagination is fired by the intrinsic character and artistic manipulation of a given material. Did you ever look over the early buildings of Minnesota — those still standing — simply as stone or wood well handled? If you have, I think you will agree with the good Scandinavian craftsmen we so highly prize in this community: "That's a good piece of work."

And so, in dealing with everyday art on that mythical yet painfully realistic Main Street, we encounter the practical problems of structural form, utility, and beauty. They are not new, but have remained paramount in the theoretical literature from Vitruvius, who formulated the ancient admonition for architecture, "habeatur ratio firmitatis, utilitatis, venustatis," down to the protagonists of genuine architecture today.¹³

It was my hope that some of the photographs of Minnesota's artistic monuments which I used as illustrations with this address might be published. They were not used merely as illustrations, but as examples of strikingly beautiful works of art that have been lost by sheer neglect or willful destruction as well as of some of the fine buildings that have been preserved.

I showed, for instance, an old photograph, from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection, of Sibley's Mendota house in a pathetic state of ruin and neglect. As I compared the building shown in this picture with the clean, sturdy, and inspiring structure we see today, I remarked that I had no idea whether or not it "paid," but

¹² Frank Lloyd Wright, *On Architecture: Selected Writings, 1894-1940*, 112, 126 (New York, 1941).

¹³ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, book 1, chapter 3, section 2.

that certainly the people of Minnesota had profited immeasurably by its preservation as a cultural monument. Later a member of the audience informed me that the Sibley House, which is maintained as a museum by the Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution, actually does pay, and that it has attracted tourists from all parts of the country. I have often wondered whether our historic monuments could not be as successful as our state fairs, winter carnivals, and summer aquatennials, if the same creative effort were put into their promotion.

Among other pioneer houses that still survive in excellent state of preservation are those of Governor Alexander Ramsey on Walnut and Exchange streets and of Isaac Wright on Walnut Street, both in St. Paul. It is particularly fortunate that the Ramsey house still has its original iron fence and handsome gateway, just as they were when the house was finished in 1872. The picture I showed revealed a number of the artistic qualities which the designers and craftsmen sought to emphasize. If the iron fence and gate had been destroyed, much of the beauty and stateliness of the mansion would be lost. The actual photographs of the Robertson house as it appeared in the 1860's and as it is now revealed a contrast that was indeed startling. I think the audience agreed with me in my belief that this stately old home would have been a cultural asset to the city if it had been preserved as it was originally. At the time the Emmett house was destroyed, it was estimated that the investment of a thousand dollars in repairs and taxes would have saved it.

Good photographs can do a great deal to emphasize certain artistic qualities in a building that we ordinarily do not notice. I showed a number of unusual views of the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul, which to my mind is one of the finest architectural monuments in the city. With the superb workmanship and texture of its stone, I contrasted the impressive board and batten structure of another St. Paul building, the old Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, which is still standing on Cedar and Twelfth streets and is now used as a shop by the Goodwill Industries.

These buildings can still be seen on the Main streets of Minnesota communities, but there are many more that have been irrepa-

rably lost. I do not advocate the preservation of these monuments simply because they are old and quaint, nor because they may originally have cost a great deal of money. The museum of the historical society treasures an old painting of the Chapel of St. Paul. It was a pitifully humble structure, built of oak and tamarack logs. Father Galtier described that log church in a letter of January 14, 1864, addressed to Bishop Grace; he said that it "would well remind one of the stable of Bethlehem," and he recalled that on November 1, 1841, he "blessed the new basilica, smaller, indeed, than the Basilica of St. Paul in Rome, but as well adapted as the latter for prayer and love to arise therein from pious hearts."¹⁴

If that log church were preserved today — in reality rather than in a painting — would it not still serve the same purpose? Certainly it would; likewise it would help us to appreciate the power of our spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as to realize the material accomplishments that make up America today.

¹⁴ A. McNulty, "The Chapel of St. Paul," in *Acta et Dicta*, 1:65 (July, 1907).



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